

A Scheme for Poverty Alleviation in Sri Lanka

A worldwide appeal to all generous and sympathetic Sri Lankans everywhere.

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Preface

A few centuries before the Christian era, an eminent Buddhist disciple of India named Thera Mahinda introduced Buddhism to our island country of Sri Lanka. That was through the generous missionary zeal of the renowned Indian Emperor Asoka who dispatched similar missions to many parts of Asia, east and west. This marks the turning point in the history of Sri Lanka. The people of the land, referred to as Sinhala today, thereafter became Buddhists. By the fifth century A.D. the land was already referred to by the Chinese traveller monk Fa Hsien as the country of the Lion Descendants [Shih tse Kuo or Sheng Chia Lo, i.e. Sinhala].

Sri Lanka, a country which earlier had even a God of the Hunt or *Vyādhadeva* occupying a palm tree as his abode, and had its rulers going out on deer hunt as royal sport, soon banned the killing of animals [*māghātāñ ca akāray*]. Security and shelter was provided for man, bird and beast, they say even the fish. In the alternative, they turned to plentiful fruit-growing, specially the melons, in addition to their rice production and home gardening. All these changes, in a wholesome new direction, are specifically recorded in our histories.

The prosperity of the country achieved by these peace loving people through their agricultural enterprises and the eminence they gained through their religious and cultural achievements seem to have soon roused the jealousy of the neighbouring people of peninsular India. Waves of aggressive invaders from time to time tore apart the religious peacefulness of the country, wrecking their religious edifices and ruined the economic well being of the people. Many brave Sri Lankan rulers rose to the occasion, and realizing their obligation to the

country and the people, repelled these successfully, time and again. King Dutugemunu, with his unique war of liberation, diligently planned out for him by his father, restored considerably long-lasting peace and contributed to religious-cultural growth of Sri Lanka. History records that even countries of the Middle East like Iran were enamoured of the flourishing state of Buddhism here, for they themselves were already enjoying it in their own countries. Both literary and archaeological evidence of this, is more than plentiful.

The worst disaster that befell Sri Lanka was its falling into the grips of the colonial empire-builders, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English. They not only drained everything out of these defenseless colonies to fill their coffers at home, but also contributed directly to the propagation and expansion of their religious creeds overseas. There is more than adequate evidence in Sri Lanka about their bid to wipe Buddhism out of the land. The state aided and abetted in these menacing activities.. However, with all their efforts for nearly 500 years, these invaders could convert only 4 per cent of the Sinhala people to their religion.

Proposals

During those crushing years of colonial rule, totaling up to a couple of centuries, many things have gone wrong in our land. Attitudes to work, employment and livelihood have completely turned topsy-turvy. Work for wages and the attitude of working as mere employees has marred the utilization of manpower resources in the land. People were used to working on the land as owners of the land and quite often worked together jointly for mutual benefit. Work for wages has alienated people from the land. People have ceased to be proud as sons of the soil. The dead-weight of the religion of the rulers and the resultant arrogance of the beneficiaries have contributed considerably to the increasing communal disharmony in the country.

Since the independence of this country fifty years ago, the situation has

deteriorated a great deal more. The smouldering communal disharmony in the country, fanned through the political indifference and apathy towards solving it, has led to its reaching staggering heights, with more and more diverse groups tending to join the fray. Lack of productivity in the land in relation to the basic need of food for the people, mismanaged problems of unemployment at all levels and the consequent escalation of crime rate in the country, all have impoverished the country as a whole. The state, both in terms of its strategy and resources, is undeniably ill-equipped to handle it. This is where the private sector as well as a collective sense of nationalism has to step in to redress the situation.

It is our firm belief that to get the people of this country back on their own feet, we have to trace back to the roots of our culture. They essentially lie in agriculture. We have to return to our good earth. Agricultural rehabilitation will bring back more than half the peace and prosperity we are looking forward to. If we plan well and get back to it in earnest, it will immediately gather together and centralize the interests and the activities of the family. The very basis of our existence lies in agricultural productivity. It is admitted in the world today, and that through the findings of seriously undertaken research, that over mechanization of agriculture ruins the smooth working of the human community. Family and community wise engaged labour and pooled resources is often found to be most rewarding.

We propose that to begin with we start with a pilot project, whole heartedly utilizing the leadership of *dāyaka sabhās* in our temples. While the entire village has to be mustered, we shall begin with a few selected families. The selection shall be in terms of 1. suitability of their land, soil wise, for growing of vegetable and fruit trees, 2. availability of water within easy reach, 3. access to man-power resources from within its own membership if possible or by grafting willing partners to the project.

We have to provide agricultural implements like mamoties, alavangos, knives of various sorts, cane baskets, watering cans and hose pipes, water-pumps

where needed. Seeds, cuttings and tubers etc. for planting shall be found on a well planned collecting basis, either from the private sector or government departments.

A very major area which we propose to develop in these projects is the involvement of the youth of the area, both boys and girls, in these activities. We have an inalienable right to use the senior students [of 15 years of age or more and of good physical fitness] of our *Dahaṃ Pāsālas*. We have neglected this area far too long, until our young growing ups, in their neglect by parents, find time for drugs, alcohol and blue films.

To implement these, even in a humble experimental way, the project needs funds. It shall be the duty of all well-wishers of human development to come forward generously. We shall provide reports of our achievements at least twice a year. Thank you.